



PATRICK TOMLINSON ASSOCIATES

Web Site – www.patricktomlinson.com Contact – ptomassociates@gmail.com

EQUINE ASSISTED LEARNING – DEBBIE WOOLFE

- 1. Why Horses can be so Therapeutic in Work with Traumatized Children and Young People - Debbie Woolfe (2014)**
- 2. Why Horses can be so Therapeutic in Work with Traumatized Children and Young People Part 2, One Year on! – Debbie Woolfe (2015)**

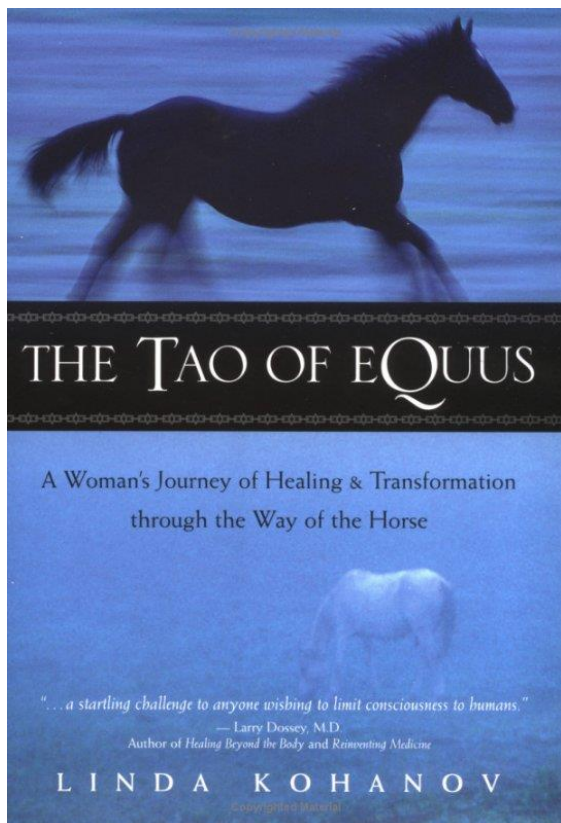
WHY HORSES CAN BE SO THERAPEUTIC IN WORK WITH TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE – PART 1 – DEBBIE WOOLFE (2014)

The first 14 years of my career was in a therapeutic community for boys who were traumatized due to abuse and neglect. The Cotswold Community was situated on a 365-acre farm. I have often wondered how much of the boys' healing was gained from living on the farm and spending so much time doing activities and being outside.

In more recent years, many research studies have highlighted the benefits of therapies that connect people to the natural world. For example, wilderness therapy, equine therapy and the therapeutic use of pets and animals. As well as these types of activity contributing to the recovery from trauma, we also know that they can be generally helpful in reducing stress and improving other health conditions. I believe many of these approaches are what Bruce Perry (2004) has termed 'biologically respectful' because they connect people to their genetic predispositions.

I invite people who have particularly interesting and innovative perspectives the opportunity to write a guest blog. This is the first guest blog and I am delighted to introduce Debbie Woolfe and her organization Stable Relationships, which is based in Telford, West Midlands, UK.

Patrick Tomlinson



Stable Relationships is an organization that has recently been set up to enable more children, young people, staff and carers to have access to emotionally intelligent, therapeutic and training activities involving horses.

All our programmes combine the theories of child development and trauma with the practicalities of equine-based experiential learning. Many of our activities are based on the Epona approach (Linda Kohanov, *The Tao of Equus*, 2001).

Horses are prey animals, so their first response is that of fight, flight, and freeze. They communicate non-verbally by picking up on the energetic waves of emotion in their herd, to stay safe. This makes them hypervigilant and excellent at reading the emotions of anyone they interact with. Our approach is based on the knowledge that we need to be calm to build relationships and learn. Horses are most able to complete tasks successfully when

the people working with them are able to be emotional leaders. This usually involves the people becoming calm as the first step towards any activity.



Horses respond to their environment and people interacting with them in similar ways to traumatised people, which makes them excellent at helping staff who work with these people.

Through the work with horses, staff are better able to understand the impact they can have and develop new strategies to improve their working practice. For example, we do an activity where a staff member approaches a horse with the goal of it touching them on the back of the hand. The horse is loose in a space. The person has to become aware of their own feelings of excitement, vulnerability and fear within the challenge, and manage these feelings to become calm. They also have to notice tiny movements within the horse, such as a flick of the ear or a swish of the tail. When they see these things, they understand how sensitive a horse (and the children/young people they work with) can be. They develop practical strategies for approaching in a way that promotes maximum calm. Self-awareness is a large part of the course and staff have reported it impacting their personal as well as professional lives.



Part of our young person course involves them setting boundaries with horses. As a horse approaches, they notice and rate their feelings as it moves. They are taught how to stop a horse coming closer than they want and are given the opportunity of experiencing and regulating their own arousal levels and emotions as it approaches. For young people who have experienced various types of abuse or who struggle to regulate higher levels of emotion, this

experience can be highly empowering.

We also take horses out to schools to teach emotional intelligence sessions. Children work through various tasks to help them feel calm, observe and become aware of the messages behind their emotions, and learn how it feels to be trusted and trustworthy. One activity involves leading horses through various obstacles. The horses need to have a high level of trust in the young person to face obstacles, which may feel challenging to the horse. For a young person to achieve the task successfully they need to be calm, take things at the pace of the horse, keep the horse safe, communicate effectively with it and encourage it.

Finally, we offer creative curriculum sessions for young people who may struggle to engage with classroom-based types of learning. The outdoor environment with all its noises, smells, space and practical learning opportunities is excellent at engaging young people in learning. Our horses recently helped us teach Macbeth to a group of young people from a special school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. After orienteering to find and read parts of the Macbeth story, the horses were painted with Macbeth symbols and ridden, once the young people had answered Macbeth quiz questions.

Stable Relationships is in its early days. However, we have seen the amazing impact our work has. We are lucky enough to regularly see young people work so well with each other and their horse. Often these are young people who are having major difficulties in their relationships due to particularly challenging behaviour. We are privileged to regularly see young people who won't walk past a horse, riding one a few weeks later. We are inspired as we see staff and carers who are demoralised and exhausted realising that they are more powerful and effective than they ever imagined. All our horse-based work is experiential and due to this, knowledge becomes wisdom at an accelerated rate.

Here are a couple of brief anonymised examples of our experiences,

Ben

We have a young person Ben who has been doing our course for 6 weeks now, so he is halfway through. He attends a special school and his referral form said he has autism and depression. When he started, he was very withdrawn and the first week he refused to leave the cabin, to even walk past the horses, never mind work with them.

As the weeks have progressed, he has become far more confident with the situation and the horses. He has developed a stronger relationship with his carer and can ask her for help when he needs it, which was one of his key objectives. During the early weeks, the carer did most of the horse-based activities and Ben watched, seemingly not too engaged. However, as the weeks have gone on, he has become much more involved. He now takes the lead with all the horse-based activities, asks questions, and speaks to everyone involved about his internal processes and views. His carer has reported that he doesn't seem depressed anymore, and he tells her that visiting us is the best part of his week.

During his last session, we were working on rating our own stress levels as we worked with quite a large horse (actually, the largest we have). The carer rated herself as having higher levels of stress than Ben. At first, I thought he may not have been entirely honest, but the horses always know! His task involved leading the horse around various obstacles that she hadn't seen before. She is quite a flighty horse and was much less willing to go with his carer. The carer was trying to stay calm and talk gently to the horse, encouraging her to move with her. She did go, but was very hesitant and unsure and kept freezing, before continuing. When Ben had a turn, she went willingly. She tried new obstacles and was completely engaged and attentive to Ben throughout the whole task. He was so calm and focused, and that impacted on the horse. It demonstrated very clearly that it is a person's internal feelings that have the

biggest impact on horses, and people around them. Ben had been truthful about his levels of calm and it had been clearly shown by the horse's response. For him and his carer, having experienced that level of calm in a potentially challenging situation was an eye-opener. We were able to discuss other potentially challenging situations, away from the horses, where Ben now thought it may be more possible to stay calm. He just needed to re-create the feeling that he had just experienced. He could recall the experience he had just had and recapture the feeling of calm. It was also a big breakthrough in terms of his self-esteem. He is well aware of how far he has come, from not wanting to walk past a horse, to leading around the biggest one at the stables.

Amie

Another example comes from a school we visited last week. We take the horses to work with groups of up to 8 children for a 2-hour emotional intelligence programme. Amie who is 8 years old has had 4 placement moves since June. Her teacher reported that she had incredibly challenging behaviour and showed no fear or concern for others. She worked well with horses and was excellent at spotting the emotions in them. When it came to the end of the session, she was hugging her horse and didn't want to leave it. We gave her some time and she gave the horse a carrot as a good ending. However, it seemed to impact her teacher more. She started to cry because she said she had never seen her show feelings for any other being before. We are used to seeing these reactions, but it is always a humbling reminder of the power of the horses, and the differences they can make just by being themselves.

Debbie Woolfe

For more information please contact: contact@stable-relationships.com
<http://www.stable-relationships.com/>

References

Kohanov, L. (2001) *The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing and Transformation through the Way of the Horse*, California: New World Library, <http://goo.gl/OaglZ4>

Perry, B.D. (2004) *Maltreatment and the Developing Child: How Early Childhood Experience Shapes Child and Culture*, Margaret McCain lecture on September 23, 2004

PDF - <http://www.lfcc.on.ca/mccain/perry.pdf>

Further Reading

This is a book on Equine Therapy that may be of Interest -

Shambo, L., Young, D. and Madera, C. (2013) *The Listening Heart: The Limbic Path Beyond Office Therapy*, Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (Heal)

And an interesting website - LEAP Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy & Learning,
<http://www.leapequine.com/>

Stable Relationships Facebook Page - <https://www.facebook.com/ukstablereationships/>

Comments

[Jenny Huston](#), Qualified Therapeutic Foster Carer and Person Centred Counsellor, England

I have horses and many other furries that over the years of fostering have proven to be a gateway for my children and young people to start their journey of trust again. I feel they can teach/show us so many things and provide a great sense of belonging, responsibility and empathy without any words spoken.

Further Reading and Information

Here is a further blog by Debbie on her therapeutic work with children and horses

<http://www.ukfostering.org.uk/news/why-horsing-around-may-just-help-your-child/>

A brief video about Stable Relationships from the UK Channel 5 TV channel, showing horses and children in a school,

<https://www.facebook.com/ukstablerelationships/posts/862144820541014>

A Few books recommended by people who read this blog,

St. James, Diana (2013) *Emma Speaks: A Journey into the Soul of an Animal Friend*, Emissary Press: USA

Pike, K., Meyers, M.B., Pearce, M. and Twinney, A. (2009) *Horse as Teacher: The Path to Authenticity*, Clarity of Vision inc.: USA

Rothenberg, M. and Levine, P.A. (2012) *The Children of Raquette Lake: One Summer That Helped Change the Course of Treatment for Autism*, North Atlantic Books

WHY HORSES CAN BE SO THERAPEUTIC IN WORK WITH TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE – PART 2, ONE YEAR ON! – DEBBIE WOOLFE (2015)



Introduction



A year ago, Debbie Woolfe, founder of Stable Relationships wrote a guest blog on her work in providing Equine Assisted Learning to children and young people. I explained then my reasons for interest in this subject. During the last year, my research has continued to confirm the view that therapeutic work with children and young people (also adults), which involves the use of nature has great potential. During the same time, Debbie's venture has shown great innovation, which has captured

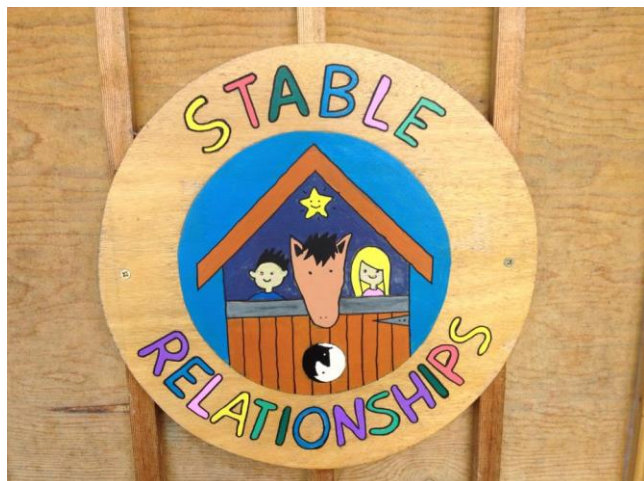
the interest of the media in the UK. In the last year her organization, Stable Relationships has been featured in two national newspapers, TV and radio. She has taken her horses and team across England and into inner-city schools, where many children had never previously been able to see and touch a real horse. This is a great TV clip, seeing the children's responses to meeting horses in their school, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8pEDy8wy4U&feature=youtu.be>

As I said, research supports the relevance of this work. Bessel van der Kolk (2014, p.80) states,

In the past two decades it has become widely recognized that when adults or children are too skittish or shut down to derive comfort from human beings, relationships with other mammals can help. Dogs and horses and even dolphins offer less complicated companionship while providing the necessary sense of safety. Dogs and horses, in particular, are now extensively used to treat some groups of trauma patients.

And,

After multiple suicide attempts, Maria was placed in one of our residential treatment centres. Initially, she was mute and withdrawn and became violent when people got too close to her. After other approaches failed to work, she was placed in an equine therapy program where she groomed her horse daily and learned simple dressage. Two years later I spoke with Maria at her high school graduation. She had been accepted by a four-year college. When I asked what had helped her most, she answered, "The horse I took care of." She told me that she first started to feel safe with her horse: he was there every day, patiently waiting for her, seemingly glad upon her approach. She started to feel a visceral connection with another creature and began to talk to him like a friend. Gradually she started talking with the other kids in the program and, eventually, with her counsellor. (p. 150-151)



Debbie's new blog describes her journey of the last year and shows how 'Stable Relationships' is such an apt name for her organization. Relationships are central to the work, between her team and the horses, between each other, with the children and their carers, and between children and the horses. The horses become the focal point within which, learning and healing relationships can take place. Debbie explains important aspects of the work that involves horses. However, much of what she describes is also about the importance of

relationships and role modelling. This comes through in her blog and infectious enthusiasm. I hope you will find her insights, as I do, to also be of wider relevance to therapeutic work with children as well as other spheres of 'people work'.

Patrick Tomlinson

The last time I wrote a blog for this site I had been running Stable Relationships for about 6 months. We are now a year and a half into our journey, and, to date, it has been an amazing and challenging experience. In this blog, I would like to share some of the challenges we have faced, and the lessons we have learnt. I would also like to thank Patrick for his encouragement and helpful support.



As I type, I am sat in our cabin. It is a beautiful log cabin with wooden floors and still a hint of the wood smell that was so prominent when it was first built. As I look out of the quaint paned glass windows, I can see dew-soaked, tufty grass fields, filled with majestic horses, grazing peacefully. It is a windy but sunny day and the shadows dance on the ground as they are cast and commanded by the leaves of the old oak tree overlooking the cabin. It is, by far, the most beautiful place I have ever worked; and as the leaves turn yellow, then orange, then red, making the trees into longer-lasting mini balls

of rainbow, all around me; I can't help thinking how lucky I am to be a part of Stable Relationships.

It is just a part though. It is my business, but it feels like it runs through me, rather than is run by me. I am part of a team. A large team, with many horses, organizations, young people, and direct colleagues. Anyone who knows me well will say that I like to be in charge....and really do not like to be told what to do. I tend to ask for advice but then act in accordance with whatever I had already decided to do before I even asked. Being part of this team has changed that about me. A colleague described our immediate team of four, as lone wolves. I would say that was true when we started. All four of us probably preferred to just get on and do things our own way. It is not true anymore...we have had to learn to work together.

A horse herd has various roles within it. However, these roles are not set in stone and sometimes they swap. Each horse has a value to the herd and if they tried to survive alone, they would not last very long. Our team has developed in the same way, although horses know this and behave in this way naturally; for us, it has been a steeper learning curve! Creating programmes that are engaging, educational, and focused has been a mix of equine knowledge and pedagogy.



Individually, I know about children, young people, and teaching, and my colleagues know about everything to do with horses. When we started, we were more rigid in the roles we had. As we have developed, we have all learnt about the other aspect. I have learnt that playing 'Duck, Duck, Goose' (or 'Horse, Horse, Pony'), the popular children's game where one child chases another round the outside of a circle, is not the best game when horses are part of the circle - even if they are really, super calm horses. However, my colleagues have learnt that there are many circle games that horses and children can play together...and we all now work

together to think of new games that are equally fun for horses and children. Working creatively as part of a team has been one of the biggest and most unexpected pleasures to date. It is how horses work, effortlessly, but for us, it is an ongoing learning process.

It has sometimes been challenging. At times it has been a clash of priorities, values, and worlds. I really dislike conflict, as do most people! That may be where some of my lone wolf-ness comes from. I would rather get on and do something myself than have a conflict with another person. I would rather avoid a disagreement than work through something because I am never sure what the other side of a disagreement will look or feel like. However, this avoidance has also had to change. The horses leave no room for pretending things are fine if they are not; in the same way that a traumatised child or young person will know if you are having an 'off' day. It was clear to all our team that we needed to be honest about our feelings in the same way that the horses are. If we wanted to teach 'Emotional Intelligence', we needed to be emotionally intelligent. Not just when we are with young people, but also at the core of our business, and the core of ourselves. Of course, that is an ongoing process, but our awareness of it, and commitment to it means that we have had to learn to deal with challenges head-on. I have learnt what is on the other side of conflict, within this herd anyway.

The EPONA approach (Kohanov, 2001) teaches that a horse will experience an emotion honestly, work out the message behind the emotion, change or accept something, and then let it go...or go back to grazing. For example, in a situation where there may be a conflict, if one of our team hasn't liked how another has acted or responded to something, it is often easy to let the feelings build in the hope of avoiding the conflict. However, the feelings stay as an energy that can be picked up by horses, young people, and ourselves. They make us harder to read, less clear, and less effective in our work. When we are able to act as a horse would; address the issue, change or accept something and then let it go, we are once again clear to work effectively. I have learnt that through experience.



On some level, I guess I thought that if there was conflict within our team, it might last forever and possibly be the end of our team. I have learnt that feelings really do not last forever if they are managed. Ignoring them seems a sure way to make them intensify though. It has come as a bit of a revelation that dealing with uncomfortable feelings like those felt in a situation of potential conflict, when they are still quite small, means that they pass much quicker. Happily, to date, our team is getting much better at this and we have all

experienced that on the other side of conflict, we are all still here.

There was a situation a while ago that made me feel pretty angry. I do not often feel strong emotions relating to the way that young people are managed when they are not with me and

so I was surprised by how strongly I felt. The feelings led to a lot of reflection though, so I am sure they were useful! A young person had to leave his session early but had not been told previously. This meant he spent the whole morning looking forward to his horse time, to be told at the point of riding, that he had to leave. The reason he had to leave was that one of his relatives had died a few months earlier and that day was the day his social worker had decided to tell him. Understandably he became very distressed when he was told he had to leave. I am sure he would have become even more distressed when he was told the news about his relative.

It made me question why the situation had been handled as it had. Could he not have stayed an extra hour to have his horse time? Why had he not been told about leaving early previously? I wondered if it was maybe because no one felt able to help him manage his emotions. Maybe they wanted his understandably, heightened levels of frustration, confusion, sadness, and anger to be kept at bay until the very last minute, so as to keep things calm for as long as possible? As adults working with traumatised children and young people, we do try to keep things calm. 'Calm is where we can learn and make friends', I tell the young people I work with. However, through the conflicts I have had to face head-on, I have discovered that calm is on the other side of managing emotions...not avoiding them.



If something scares a horse everyone around that horse will know about it. They make a fuss...they run fast or they fight. It is not hidden. They also get over it pretty quickly once they realise it is safe or something has changed. Watching that boy have to leave his horse session just made me question whether it was him who couldn't manage his emotions very well, or whether it was others around him, who found it too painful to have a brave conversation. A conversation that would maybe have contributed to a big emotional response, but also might have been short-

lived, teaching that feelings do not last forever. A conversation that was full of potential to see that calm can be on the other side of emotional chaos and that maybe people are capable of going back to grazing just like horses.

Our journey has been one of challenging priorities. I believe we are all changed and are all a little more understanding of each other's worlds. Often this learning has been comical (to the other people anyway)! I have found it funny that on entering a barn filled with horses and people a colleague said, 'that must be your work experience person over there - the one with the green hair'. It was actually a member of care staff and my work experience young person was the one dressed very smartly in horse clothes with her hair tied back neatly. Perceptions of a troubled teenager! They have found it equally comical when I turn up to work wearing fashion cowboy boots in the middle of winter...'How is it even possible to work in this cold?' or when I

complain about my hat not fitting over my hair and end up getting sunstroke instead of wearing it. Apparently, these are things you just know if you work with horses?! On one occasion, a colleague asked if an entire car park of teachers could stop teaching and move their cars so that our horse lorry could get into the playground. He was as surprised as I was about the sunstroke, that teachers cannot just stop teaching to move their cars.

As I said, we have all had some steep learning curves. In the same way that horses do though, we have learnt to accept the strange goings-on of each other's worlds. Occasionally now, I look like I know what I am doing when I lead a horse or tie up a hay net. My colleagues definitely look like they know what they are doing as they sit in a classroom, on little people's chairs, and act out a puppet show about the fight/flight/freeze response to a group of children.

We have been teaching emotional intelligence. We have been teaching how to work well in a team, how to develop good social skills, how to manage feelings, how to trust and be trusted, what happens in our brains when we have big feelings, and how to feel calm. As I reflect on the last year and a half, I am aware that the horses have always had these skills and have been leading us every step of the way. We are following them as they create their magic and continually show us how to be better people, a better team, and only then, better teachers who can hopefully help to make a better difference through our work.

Debbie Woolfe

References

Kohanov, L (2001) *The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing and Transformation Through the Way of the Horse*, New World Library: California

van der Kolk, B. (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Viking: New York

* (See, e.g., B.M. Levinson, "Human/Companion Animal Therapy," *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 14, no. 2 (1984): 131-44; D.A. Willis, "Animal Therapy," *Rehabilitation Nursing* 22, no.2 (1997): and A.H. Fine, ed., *Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice* (Academic Press, 2010).

Further Reading

Jurga, F. (2017) Horsing around in Childhood Really can Change your Life - First Evidence-Based Study to Measure Positive Levels of Stress Hormones in Children in Touch with Horses

<http://equusmagazine.com/blog/horsing-childhood-wsu-evidence-cortisol-stress-hormone-16393>

Stable Relationships Media Links

Link to BBC Radio Shropshire Interview, Oct 2015 – Debbie and children talking about feelings, flight/fight/freeze and calming, <https://youtu.be/GpzWUwdxPhc>

Link to Channel 5 News Report, June 2015 - some great comments by Debbie and children on horses on the subjects of relationships, feelings and being calm

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8pEDy8wy4U&feature=youtu.be>

Stable Relationships - Our First Year! A picture Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOM5PO6x7IE>

Woolfe, D. (2016) How Interacting with Horses can Engage Reluctant Learners

<https://www.tes.com/news/how-interacting-horses-can-engage-reluctant-learners>

Like us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukstablerelationships>